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AUTHOR Morrissey, Thomas J.
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ABSTRACT

An approach to writing for high school and college students is presented in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): The science fiction course I teach is an elective that enrolls about fifty students per class. Ninety percent or more of the students are not English majors and have done little writing in the recent past. Assigning frequent papers proved difficult in such a large class. THE APPROACH (excerpt): Out of these problems came the five-minute entry. At the start of each class, students wrote for five minutes in response to a question about the assigned reading for that day. Grammar, mechanics, and organization do not count. Papers receive an 'S' (satisfactory) or 'U' (unsatisfactory), the only criterion being that they must demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that their authors have read and thought about the assigned reading. This eliminates the need to take attendance or grade quizzes, and encourages regular attendance and timely reading of assignments. Students who write poor entries can be identified early in the term. Thus the five-minute entry gives the students frequent writing practice and affords the instructor relatively painless opportunities to observe student writing. (KC)

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# The Five-Minute Entry: A Writing Exercise for Large Classes in All Disciplines

*Thomas J. Morrissey,* State University of New York, Plattsburgh, NY

ED236604

## Level:

High school and college

## Author's Comment

Instructors who believe that writing assignments should be an integral part of most college courses are not as hard to find as some might think; those who actually assign a reasonable amount of writing to students in large classes (50 or more) are a rarer breed. The best of intentions sometimes succumb to the instinct for self-preservation. Even English teachers—who are used to the martyrdom that comes from lugging home briefcases full of papers—must wrestle with the nature and quantity of writing to be required of students in well enrolled literature courses.

The science fiction course I teach is an elective that enrolls about fifty students per class. Ninety percent or more of the students are not English majors and quite a few have done little writing in the recent past. During the first few years I offered the course, I devoted some class time to writing instruction, but some students needed more. Assigning frequent papers proved difficult in such a large class, especially since I was trying to keep pace with several composition classes. At the same time, I was forcing myself to give daily short-answer and brief-answer quizzes in order to make sure that all of the students were reading assignments regularly. The students were not learning to write about the material and I was wasting time grading unpopular quizzes—these factors detracted from the very real pleasure of teaching this course.

## The Approach

A year and a half ago I decided to apply to this problem two axioms derived from my experience as a writing teacher. They are as follows: (1) students who write every day write better than students who do not; and (2) it is neither possible nor desirable to read carefully or grade every writing exercise. Out of these came the five-minute entry. It works like this. At the start of each class, students write for five minutes in response to a question about the assigned reading for that day. Grammar, mechanics and organization do not count. Papers receive an 'S' (satisfactory) or 'U' (unsatisfactory), the only criterion being that they must demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that their authors have read and thought about the assigned reading. Questions can be as specific as "Why do the Martians give Sam Parkhill a land grant to half of Mars?" Although there are implicit reasons for the Martians' actions in Bradbury's book, a satisfactory answer might begin, "I don't know why they do it, because . . . " Likewise, good responses to the second question have sometimes opened with, "What do you mean by 'satisfied'?" At the start of the term, students are told that they will have approximately X number of entries and that 80% must be satisfactory.

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The five-minute entry has lesser and greater benefits. On the mundane level, it eliminates the need to take attendance or grade Mickey Mouse quizzes. It also encourages regular attendance and timely reading of assignments, though in science fiction these are not major problems with most students.

More significant is what the entry does for student writing over the course of the semester. Writing directly before class discussion helps to unite the activities of writing, thinking and talking about the material. I have found that many students enjoy preparing the entries and that the pieces tend to get longer and better stylistically as time goes on. The five-minute entry is more structured than free-writing but less formal than an exam situation, which makes it a good introduction to both kinds of writing activity. Writing essays on midterm and final exams is a more natural act when it has a daily context. On exams, students know they will be held accountable for revision, but once they have gotten into the habit of producing many words in a short time, it is easier for them to save time for correction. Likewise, when a formal out-of-class paper is assigned, it is a simple matter to explain to students how the entry resembles free-writing and how free-writing can help them explore ideas.

Although the entries are hastily written, some are noticeably stronger or weaker than others. Students who write poor entries because of difficulties with written expression can be identified early in the term. On a particularly good entry it is useful sometimes to write a brief note explaining the strengths. Once in a while a student asks me a question as part of his or her response; here again, a written answer is necessary. Despite the obvious benefit derived from these brief teacher commentaries, they take very little time to produce. Ordinarily I can expect to spend well under one minute per entry, especially later in the term when there are very few 'U' papers.

Thus the five-minute entry gives the students frequent writing practice and affords the instructor relatively painless opportunities to observe—not dissect—student writing. Perhaps the best thing about the exercise is that it can be used by instructors across the curriculum as a means of making writing more central to the learning experience.